DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 515 EA 020 975

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TITLE Communicating.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management, Eugene, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE 89
CONTRACT OERI-R-86-0003
NOTE 22p.; In "School Leadership: Handbook for Excellence" (EA 020 964). For first edition, see ED 209 736.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Responsibility; *Administrator Role; *Communication (Thought Transfer); *Communication Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; Group Dynamics; *Organizational Communication; Principals; *Public Relations; *School Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

Chapter 11 of a revised volume on school leadership, this chapter offers suggestions for administrators desiring to communicate more effectively with various groups within and outside the school. The most valuable business executives excel at giving employees timely feedback, accepting criticism without being defensive, speaking clearly and succinctly, expressing feelings and ideas openly, and being good listeners. These communication skills are as valued in educational organizations as they are in the business world. Meaningful communication is a two-way information-sharing process. To be effective communicators, administrators must be skilled at listening, asking questions, paraphrasing, agreeing and disagreeing, describing behavior and feelings, checking perceptions, and providing feedback. Improvement exercises are provided, along with the rationale for establishing positive in-school communication and basic principles for communicating with small groups and angry groups. Communication with the public is equally important. Pointers are provided for planning the public relations program, attending to informal messages, fostering two-way communications, handling the media, and conducting opinion surveys. Although communicating can be complex and even frustrating, there are rich rewards for administrator perseverance in this area. (MLH)

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# Chapter 11

# Communicating

David Coursen and John Thomas

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# Chapter 11
# Communicating

David Coursen and John Thomas

Good communication has always been an important part of effective school leadership. Whether educators have been outlining the rules to nineteenth-century children in a one-room school or explaining innovative teaching methods to contemporary parents, administrators have always needed to be effective communicators.

By *communication*, we mean the art of listening carefully and expressing views clearly and concisely—skills essential for anyone in a leadership position. For example, high-level administrators of successful businesses say that the most valuable managers in their organizations are those who excell in such communication skills as giving employees timely feedback about their work, accepting criticism without being defensive, speaking clearly and succinctly, and being good listeners. Interviewed by Susan Glaser and Anna Eblen, the top-level executives also said they valued managers who expressed their "feelings, opinions, and ideas openly." These communication skills are as valued in educational organizations as they are in the business world.

This chapter offers some suggestions for administrators who want to learn how to communicate more effectively with people both within and outside the school. Divided into two major sections, the chapter discusses principles and skills of effective interpersonal communication and then recommends strategies for communicating with the public.

## Learning to Communicate

Communication is a human relations skill that is, in a sense, only half understood. Most people believe that if they speak or write clearly, or make gestures whose meanings can be clearly understood, they are communicating successfully. However, in a basic sense, communication is a two-way process, a sharing of information. This means that communication is listening as well as speaking, understanding as well as being understood.

### Communicating for Understanding

Saul Alinsky, the labor organizer, once said that a person could lack every quality that makes a good organizer and still be successful—with one exception. That person would have to be able to communicate.

"Communication with others takes place when they understand what

you're trying to get across to them," Alinsky wrote. "If they don't understand, then you're not communicating, regardless of words, pictures, or anything else."

It doesn't matter what you know, Alinsky said. If you don't communicate—and in terms within your audience's experience—you're not even a failure. "You're just not there," Alinsky said.

When he spoke to groups, Alinsky often employed analogies relating to sex or the toilet. He was not intending to shock people, particularly, but he was using terms common to all. The reaction he looked for was laughter, a nodding of heads, some sign of understanding or agreement. Failing to find a point of common experiential ground at which his audiences could receive and understand, Alinsky attempted to create an experience for them, often with the use of modern day parables, jokes, and demonstrations to illustrate his points.

He once told of a man trying to give away ten dollar bills within a four-block radius in New York City. One man apologized for not having change. Several hurried past, claiming not to have any money. A woman angrily said she wasn't "that kind," while another said she didn't come "that cheap." Still others believed it was a con game. Alinsky's point was that the demonstration produced shock, confusion, and silence—together with avoidance or actual flight—because it was an attempt to communicate in a way that was outside the scope of experience for these New Yorkers. The same stunt, undertaken at the Bowery, would have had the opposite results: taking money from strangers was within the frame of experience for derelicts and transients.

According to Alinsky, communication that is too abstract and general—without being reduced to smaller bites by the specifics of experience—is rhetoric without much meaning to your listeners. He cited the difference between news of the death of a quarter million people and news of the death of a close friend.

As Alinsky helps us to see, the communicator must be able to grab the attention of his or her listeners by relating to their experience. This principle is all important when the school leader is trying to get a point across to anyone—a student, a teacher, or a group of parents. The able communicator reflects on the listener's experience and chooses words, a story, or a personal illustration that will establish common ground. And the communicator fleshes out his or her message in concrete terms that will be clearly understood.

As we inquire further into the communication process, we will see that this theme of communicating for understanding appears again and again. Next we examine the components of the communication process, before discussing some particular communication skills.

## How the Process Works

In an article on the communication process for principals, Jerry Pulley identifies some of the points where problems can develop. Understanding these points of potential interference is essential to successful communication and to seeing why communications sometimes go awry. In the classical model

of communication, there is a source, a message, a medium, a receiver, and a reaction. The following points are worth remembering about each:

- *Source*. How the source (in this case, the school leader) is seen is very important. A principal must have a positive image and an aura of credibility.
- *Message*. All messages should be delivered in clear, grammatical language, free of jargon and "loaded" words. When delivering a message, the principal should be conscious of body language and other forms of nonverbal communication.
- *Medium*. The chosen medium should be effective in reaching the desired audience and getting its attention. Face-to-face contact, which allows for direct feedback, is ideal. Often, several media can be used simultaneously, so that people missed by one will be reached by another.
- *Receiver*. Any message will be received with a certain number of preconceptions and a certain amount of prejudice, and a school leader should never forget this. By understanding his or her receivers, the principal can try to construct a message that will not alienate them.
- *Reactions*. These are difficult to predict. Even if the first four parts of the model are carefully considered and handled, there still may be unexpected reactions. Anticipate as many as you can, and try to plan for them.

Since there is always an element of risk in communicating openly, *trust* is particularly important, according to Richard Schmuck and Philip Runkel. They list what they call "freeing responses" to increase trust:

- listening attentively rather than silently
- paraphrasing, checking impressions of the other's meaning
- seeking additional information to understand better
- offering relevant information
- describing observable behaviors that influence you
- directly reporting your own feelings
- offering opinions, stating your value position

The authors also list things that reduce trust, which they call "binding responses":

- changing the subject without explanation
- focusing on and criticizing things that are unchangeable
- trying to advise and persuade
- vigorously agreeing or strongly objecting
- approving someone for conforming to your own standards
- commanding or demanding to be commanded

## Communication Skills

Charles Jung and his associates point out that there are no real tricks to good communication; the only secret is having a sincere interest in the other person. A number of skills, however, are important for the effective com-

municator to understand and master. The skills that we highlight here are listening, asking questions, paraphrasing, agreeing and disagreeing, describing behavior, describing feelings, checking perceptions, and giving feedback.

## Listening

People who are trying to become more effective communicators should begin not by learning talking skills, but listening skills, say Susan Glaser and Anthony Biglan. Although often thought of as a silent, passive activity, they say, listening need not be and should not be so limited.

Indeed, as Richard Gemmet points out, nonverbal signals—eye contact, attentiveness, use of hands, facial expressions, and tone of voice, among others—are often the best communicators of your interest. Good listeners, he says:

- Don't interrupt, especially to correct mistakes or make points
- Don't judge
- Think before answering
- Face the speaker
- Are close enough to hear
- Watch nonverbal behavior
- Are aware of biases or values that distort what they hear
- Look for the basic assumptions underlying remarks
- Concentrate on what is being said
- Avoid rehearsing answers while the other person is talking
- Never tune out because of "red flag" words or start mental combat
- Avoid having to have the last word

Gemmet describes listening as an art. One masters it, he says, by developing "the *attitude* of wanting to listen, then the skills to help you express that attitude." Good listeners have learned to discipline themselves so their minds don't wander. Frank Freshour mentions five approaches these good listeners use:

> *Visualizing*, for example, picturing themselves as being in the speaker's shoes or engaging "in the activity the speaker is talking about."
>
> *Analyzing* the speaker's message. "Does it make sense? Is it logical? What evidence does the speaker provide? . . . Is the communication a matter of fact or of opinion?"
>
> *Summarizing* what the speaker is saying by recapitulating the main points and evidence.
>
> *Taking notes* of both the main ideas (on the left side of the paper) and supporting details (on the other side).
>
> *Anticipating* what the speaker is going to say. "If you are correct, you learn by repetition. If your anticipation is off the target, you learn by comparison and contrast."

A skill related to listening is asking questions.

## Asking Questions

Question asking is an excellent way to begin communication, because it tends to make the other persons feel you're paying attention and interested in their response. In fact, it sounds like you want even more. Asking more effective questions, say Glaser and Biglan, involves three skills:

- asking open-ended questions that can't be answered with a single word
- asking focused questions that aren't too broad to be answered
- asking for additional details, examples, impressions

## Paraphrasing

Jung and his colleagues comment on one of the oddities of modern life. If someone tells you his or her phone number, seven unambiguous pieces of information, you will probably repeat it to make sure you have it right, but if he or she makes a far more complex statement, you are likely to offer simple agreement or disagreement. In other words, as the possibilities for misunderstanding increase, our efforts to clarify messages generally decrease.

One way to avoid misunderstanding is paraphrasing—repeating what you just heard in an effort to show the other person what his or her words mean to you. Paraphrasing allows you to confirm your perceptions and assumptions. In this way, you not only clarify the meaning of the message, but you show genuine interest and concern about better understanding.

Jung and his colleagues stress that the real purpose of paraphrasing is not to show what the other person actually meant (which would require mind-reading skills) but to show what it meant to *you*. This may mean restating the original statement in more specific terms, using an example to show what it meant to you, or restating it in more general terms.

Glaser and Biglan warn against overdoing this skill. People who paraphrase constantly—even simple, relatively unimportant statements—are often regarded as tedious.

## Agreeing and Disagreeing

To communicate, we must also present some of ourselves to the other person, letting them know how we feel about what they say. One way to do this is by agreement, say Glaser and Biglan, because it allows us to respond actively. Even disagreement, when done effectively, contains an element of agreement, and the school leader who has learned to agree directly and clearly will find it much easier to disagree productively.

Social psychologists have found that people who agree about important things find it much easier to work together amiably. Agreement puts the other person at ease and establishes rapport quickly. It is not necessary to avoid

disagreement when you do not agree, the authors say, but indicating points of commonality with the other persons will make it easier for them to accept your opinions. Disagreement, in fact, may make your agreement more meaningful. The authors add that it is particularly important to express agreement with new acquaintances.

## Describing Behavior

When talking about what someone is doing, it's important to distinguish between *describing* and *evaluating*. Useful behavior description, according to Jung and his associates, should report

> specific, observable actions of others without placing a value on them as right or wrong, bad or good, and without making accusations or generalizations about the other's motives, attitudes or personality traits.

It's important to be precise about the behavior to which you are responding, say the authors, and to describe a specific set of actions without judging the behavior. For example, "You've disagreed with almost everything he's said" is preferable to "You're being stubborn." Try to confine your remarks to things that are observable and stick to the facts without trying to draw conclusions about their meaning.

These suggestions can not only enhance communication, Jung and colleagues say, but will also reduce defensiveness. When someone feels threatened by a comment or action, his or her defensiveness can distract from important questions at hand and itself become the issue. Types of supportive communication that can reduce defensiveness include:

- describing rather than evaluating
- solving the problem, rather than controlling the situation
- being spontaneous, rather than following strategy
- empathizing, rather than remaining neutral
- relating to others as equals, rather than superiors or subordinates
- approaching differences of opinion with openness to new perspectives, rather than dogmatism

## Describing Feelings

How people perceive your feelings often has more to do with *their* feelings than your's. Furthermore, if you're like most people, you probably work harder describing your ideas clearly than you do describing your feelings. For these reasons, it is not always easy to describe or understand feelings.

The way to avoid misperception of feelings is to describe them as directly and vividly as possible, say Jung and colleagues. Attach the description to yourself by using the word "I," "me," or "my." Some ways to do this include referring directly to a feeling ("I'm angry"), using similes ("I feel like a fish out of water"), describing what you want to do ("I'd like to leave this room now"), or using some other figure of speech.

Be precise and unambiguous in describing your feelings, they advise. Saying "Shut up!" may express strong feelings, but it doesn't identify those feelings. It's better to say something more informative like "It hurts me to hear this!" or "Hearing this makes me angry with you (or with myself)!" Any of these statements explains why you want the other person to stop talking.

As in most aspects of communication, it is crucial to be open and honest. Feelings should be offered as pieces of information, not efforts to make the other person act differently. Again, nonverbal cues—facial expression, tone of voice, and body language—should agree with words.

## Perception Checking

Just as paraphrasing is an effort to find out what another person's words mean, perception checking is an effort to understand the feelings behind the words. One way of checking perceptions is simply to describe your impressions of another person's feelings at a given time. This helps you find out how well you're understanding the other person and, again, shows your interest in the other person. This should be done in a way that avoids any expression of approval or disapproval.

## Giving Feedback

One way to clarify communication is to ask people for their reactions to any messages sent off by your behavior. Feedback is a way to share understanding about behavior, feelings, and motivations. In giving it, say Jung and associates, it is useful to describe observed behaviors, as well as the reactions they caused. When giving feedback, follow these guidelines:

- The receiver should be ready to receive feedback.
- Comments should describe, rather than interpret, action.
- Feedback should focus on recent events or actions.
- It should focus on things that can be changed.
- It should not be used to try to force people to change.
- It should be offered out of a sincere interest and concern for the other person.

When you are receiving feedback, you should first state what you want feedback about, then check what you have heard, and share your reactions to it.

A feedback skill that is especially important for administrators is to let staff members know how well they are doing their jobs. In Glaser and Eblen's study, the managers who were most valued by high-level business executives looked for opportunities to give their "employees timely positive feedback about their work." In contrast, "the overriding finding" about ineffective managers was that they stressed poor performance and rarely gave positive reinforcement. "These managers were not there to compliment, but were usually there if something went wrong," the researchers say. Effective managers did give negative feedback when necessary, but privately and without anger or per-

sonal attack.

Also, say Glaser and Eblen, effective managers "accepted criticism without becoming defensive." They used negative feedback about their own performance to learn and change.

## Exercises for Improvement

Schmuck and Runkel suggest several exercises to help develop or refine the above skills:

- *Paraphrasing.* Divide into small groups. One person asks a question; the next paraphrases before answering.
- *Impression Checking.* Divide into pairs; one person conveys feelings through gestures, expressions, nonsense language, while the other person tries to interpret these cues. The two then talk about how correct the interpretations were.
- *Behavior Description.* Describe the behavior observed during any nonverbal exercise.
- *Describing Feelings.* Each person is given a written list of statements and told to identify which describe feelings and which do not (e.g., "I feel angry" does, but "I feel it's going to rain," does not).
- *Giving and Receiving Feedback.* Divide into trios. One person describes two helpful and two unhelpful behaviors of the second, who paraphrases the descriptions; the third person acts as an observer, making sure the other two are using communication skills correctly.

The same authors also describe exercises that clarify communications in meetings:

- *Right to Listen.* Each speaker is required to paraphrase the terms of the discussion up to that point before speaking.
- *Time Tokens.* Each person pays a poker chip each time he or she talks. This clarifies who talks how often; if it provokes long speeches, it will also illustrate their drawbacks.
- *High Talker Tap-out.* Signal when each speaker uses up an allotted amount of time; at the end, discuss the process and the reasons some people talk more than others.
- *Take a Survey.* Ask each person for an opinion about a certain question. Everyone contributes, if only to admit having nothing to say.

Schmuck and Runkel recommend circular seating for groups because it has two advantages: (1) nonverbal behaviors are most apparent when everyone can be clearly seen, and (2) equal participation is encouraged when there is no podium or head-of-the-table to suggest someone is "in charge." In certain circumstances, they add, videotaping or audio recording may be useful (if someone with skills and experience is available to judge what to record and when to play it back).

## The Principal's Responsibility

Because of the principal's influence, it's important that he or she communicate effectively. Jerry Valentine and his colleagues studied the impact of principals' behavior on the school's climate. "Generally speaking," they found, "the more direct the principal, the more positive the attitudes of teachers, students, and parents." Whenever they found humor used in human relations, they added, they also found a "significantly relaxed, positive human relations atmosphere."

### Removing Barriers

Faulty communications between principals and teachers rob a school of its effectiveness, say Patricia First and David Carr. Communication barriers can deplete team energy and isolate individuals who may then proceed on the basis of faulty assumptions regarding personalities or goals. In this type of situation, trust between principal and faculty—as well as overall morale—can be seriously inhibited.

Increased contact, then, would seem to be the logical remover of such barriers. First and Carr suggest that teachers should be involved early in any decision, and they should generally be kept up-to-date about whatever is going on. Meetings and various inhouse communiques are often used for this purpose. Private discussions can often provide the kind of frankness and openness needed to clear the air, while they also remove interpersonal barriers before they become larger problems. Such meetings can also be the occasion for praise and compliments for good work, say the authors. These methods are an effective way to improve communications within the school.

### Giving Praise

Robert Major argues that principals can use sincere praise whenever possible to create a more constructive atmosphere in schools. Being willing to "give strokes" and express appreciation for jobs well done are essential. One principal, after observing each class, always leaves a note mentioning only positive things. Later, if she has any criticisms to make, she meets with the teacher so she can make them face-to-face.

### Being Accessible

The principal must be certain communication channels are open both ways. The most important thing a principal can do to improve relations with the school community, writes Sandro Ingari, is to be open and accessible. It is important for people to feel you are available and welcome personal contact with them. Ingari suggests spending time with various faculty members—over lunch, during coffee breaks, in the faculty lounge, or at informal teacher "hangouts." Add the personal touch, Ingari says, by asking people about their families or calling them by their first names.

Beyond effective communicating, this is good business practice, no

matter what your profession is. A manager or administrator who doesn't know the staff also can't tap its expertise and experience to full advantage. A manager who doesn't, say Susan and Peter Glaser, is only using half the available resources. The more you get to know your staff, in fact, the better your chances of a successful administration.

### Building Teamwork

A good communications climate, says Elmore Rainey, leads to effective teamwork. An administrator who takes the time to get to know the staff will be able to identify, develop, and make best use of each staff member's capabilities. Good teamwork in a stimulating environment grows out of an earnest effort to help each staff member achieve his or her potential, Rainey writes, and the prime mover is the administrator. A supportive, encouraging, open climate stimulates communication, avoiding the problems related to misinformation and misunderstanding.

## Communicating in Small Groups

Administrators have always had to communicate with groups of staff members, parents, and students, and this ability has grown in importance with the spread of shared decision-making. Successfully meshing the various human factions in such groups can be a difficult task, requiring a delicate touch. Group members have three primary needs, according to William Schutz:

- Inclusion (or belonging)
- Control (or power)
- Affection (or friendship)

These needs must be satisfied, Schutz writes, if the group is to be successful, and they must be met adequately, but not excessively.

### Inclusion

When any group is just starting, inclusion is particularly important. Introductions and the sharing of brief, pertinent biographies about each member can often help meet this need. Assigning a "greeter" at meetings, passing out name tags to members, and organizing get-acquainted activities or social events can also help.

Overinclusion, however, can also be a problem, Schutz warns. Group members need to maintain some individuality and distance from the larger group, he says, to preserve diversity in terms of viewpoint and feedback and to maintain a richness in terms of human resource. The establishment of subgroups and a realistic division of labor is an effective way to avoid counterproductive "homogenization" of the organization.

### Control

In traditional groups, members are given influence in decisions

through such activities as exercise of voting power, election of officers, and the establishment of authoritarian hierarchies. Many groups avoid domination of the group by any one faction by limiting the amount of control members have over one another. To make sure control is evenly distributed, Susan Sayers suggests that groups study their decision-making process and practice role-switching. By giving each member a turn as the dominant member, the group can foster an equitable distribution of control.

### Affection

Beyond these overall safeguards and checks or balances, an interpersonal element must be present for the group to succeed, Schutz points out. Group members must "relate to each other with sufficient warmth and closeness" to further the group process. They must also have the freedom to express their feelings to avoid draining energy through "the suppression of hostile impulses." The need for affection can often be satisfied by allowing group members to talk briefly and informally during their work, meet for coffee after the business of the meeting, and bring refreshments to the meetings and coffeebreaks.

Like inclusion and control, affection is best used in moderation, warns Schutz. Too much closeness in a group can interfere with its ability to serve its primary purpose. It can also lead to the personalizing of issues within the group, where an issue otherwise regarded as good or bad can be decided (accepted or rejected) by the group on the basis of the popularity of the member identified most strongly with the issue. To avoid this problem, says Schutz, rules should be adopted early in the group's existence about nepotism, fraternization, agendas, and other procedural techniques, including the matter of discipline for too much affectional play.

## Communicating with Angry Groups

Controversy is no stranger to the public schools. Any number of situations—from the closing of a school to a book in the library—can become rallying points for groups of angry citizens. How should the school administrator respond?

In the case of controversial or heated issues, say Susan and Peter Glaser, it's important to pick the time and place for the interaction and to think before you speak. Make sure that you are clear about what you want from the interaction. This is a crucial phase, for you do not want to jeopardize certain goals you may want to achieve with the group later, after the controversy has passed.

You can begin by finding some common ground—something about which you and the group's spokesperson can agree. A good way to do this is to ask questions, then paraphrase the person's response. This will not only give you important additional details, but help you listen effectively.

Once you know the other person's general point-of-view, you can get

additional information by asking for specific examples likely to be behind these views. (There is at least one good reason behind every strong feeling.) Find out why the group feels the way it does and why it thinks this or that is an important issue. At times, you can guess about specific instances and let them tell you if you're right. This will open a dialogue between you, say the Glasers, and often defuse any tension in troublesome situations, while allowing you to consider how you will respond or react.

Then, it is important to agree with them. There are always two aspects of any issue with which you can agree:

- the facts of a situation
- the other person's sincerely held perception of those facts

This doesn't mean you must cave in to a different point-of-view, say the Glasers. On the contrary, you can easily maintain your own stand and simultaneously acknowledge that, yes, X incident *did* take place; and yes, the group feels strongly about it.

At this point, the Glasers say, there are four basic ways to respond to suggestions or demands relative to the issue:

- Say "yes" and implement as soon as possible.
- Say "no" but tell them why.
- Table the suggestion while you study the issue further. It's important to set a time limit on this phase. Never allow things to simply float.
- If you don't have enough information, ask for more from the group, or appoint a sub-group to study the situation further. You don't have to agree or implement suggestions or demands from every group to maintain a successful relationship with the community, but some response is vital.

Moving from general to specific, this section outlined elements of the communication process, described pertinent communication skills as well as ways to develop those skills, discussed the principal's responsibility for establishing positive communications in the school, and then covered principles of communicating in small groups and with angry groups. Now our attention shifts to another important aspect of communication for school leaders—communicating with the public.

## Reaching the Public

Just as important as good internal communications are effective communications between the school and the public outside. Lew Armistead quotes John Wherry, executive director of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), as saying that educators can get the public to support their schools if they do four things:

1. Do a good job.
2. Do a Good Job.
3. Do A GOOD JOB.

4. Make sure people know about it.

Public relations, Wherry says, has never been a way to cover up mistakes; there is no substitute for doing a good job. Some administrators, however, go to the opposite extreme—believing that doing their job well makes public relations unnecessary. Their view overlooks a basic fact, according to Armistead. Every school has a public relations program, formal or not, that operates whenever the staff or students come in contact with the surrounding public.

When a parent meets with a school official, when a child describes what went on in class during the day, or when a caller is greeted courteously, the school is communicating something to the public. If that caller is put on hold and forgotten, the school is also communicating something.

The question to ask about school public relations efforts is not, then, *whether* to develop a program but *how*.

## Planning the Public Relations Program

What would an ideal public relations program look like? Its elements are contained in this definition by the NSPRA:

> a planned and systematic two-way process of communication between an education organization and its internal and external publics . . . to stimulate a better understanding of the role, objectives, accomplishments, and needs of the organization.

As this definition suggests, planning is essential if the public relations program is to have a positive outcome. Positive public relations, in fact, are those that are planned, says Armistead. Ineffective—or even destructive—programs are those that just happen.

In planning the program, target audiences should always be clearly defined, along with strategies for best reaching them. A memory device Don Bagin, Frank Grazian, and Charles Harrison suggest to help recall a useful checklist is "GOSSEY":

> G-Goals; what do you want your PR program to accomplish?
>
> O-Obstacles; what stands in the way of achieving these goals?
>
> S-Strategy; how can you remove these obstacles or solve these problems?
>
> S-Selection; which one do you pick and how will you carry it out?
>
> E-Evaluation; how did it work, when you tried it?
>
> Y-Why; why did it succeed (or fail)?

"Brainstorming" can also be a useful tool in both the planning and organizing stages of public relations programs. It is also a useful way to generate dozens of ideas, whether you want to produce publications that are free from professional jargon or just send the school band to a convalescent home. It is

also an excellent way to identify important groups—from senior citizens and business organizations to various religious groups.

A key step in planning a public relations program is to decide what objectives the school wants to meet. Possible objectives cited by Bagin and colleagues include the following:

- promotion of public interest in the school
- gathering and reporting information about public attitudes about the school
- providing an honest, comprehensive flow of information from the school *and* the public
- reaching all the public through effective use of all available media
- developing community confidence in the schools
- educating the children through an all-out effort that integrates home, school, and community
- anticipating and forestalling problems caused by misunderstandings
- all of the above

## Attending to Informal Messages

School contact with the public can be divided into three classes:

- public and formal
- private and formal
- private and informal

The first two—covering a school's official business from report cards to press releases—are generally recognized as public relations concerns. But the often-neglected third type is by far the most important.

Communication takes place whenever anyone associated with a school gives the public any kind of message about the school. These messages can be conveyed by students, volunteers, or employees. Many people see *all* school employees—custodians, secretaries, teachers, and administrators—as "insiders" with special knowledge or information about school operations. The message they transmit may be verbal (a rumor or comment about policy) or nonverbal (litter on a school neighbor's lawn, or students helping a motorist change a flat tire). Because many of these exchanges are beyond a principal's control, a well-run school with a satisfied, well-informed staff and student body are essential to any public relations effort.

## Fostering Two-Way Communications

Like other communications, school public relations must run in two directions. Beyond keeping the public informed about the school, the school's job is to keep *itself* informed about what the public is thinking about the school. It's important, then, to evaluate all current communications, analyze what various groups or individuals think, identify major criticisms, and evaluate the

school's reputation.

Public relations—PR—could as accurately be termed RP, or relating to people, Armistead says. A two-way communication is vital: everyone should get a chance to express views or perceptions.

School administrators should never get so caught up in their efforts as to lose sight of primary goals. A classic example of bad public relations is the school district breaking its back to communicate with the public and not getting any feedback from that public, writes Philip Dahlinger. Administrators should daily remind themselves that they work for and with the community and its children. They should remain open, accessible, and receptive at all costs. Moreover, he says, they should be willing and able to take action quickly, correcting errors and resolving problems as soon as possible.

## The Media

Although personal contact is the long-range key to effective communication with the public, the best way to reach a large number of people in a short time is through the media—print and broadcast. Reporters can have tremendous impact on the public consciousness. They are seen, heard, or read by large numbers of people at the same time, and their news has a certain built-in credibility.

Media coverage gives school leaders a chance to tell their story to a large group, but the form that story takes is beyond their control. Coverage can be negative or positive, a fact that can be intimidating to administrators. The right of the press to cover news and the public's right to know it, however, dictate the reporting of newsworthy events in schools. Thus it is the administrator's job to work with the media and see that coverage of school events is as fair and accurate as possible.

In working with the media, the biggest problem for school leaders is the alarmingly easy way misunderstandings develop between school and media. This is inevitable to a certain extent, because of the tension between the school's and the media's objectives. Schools want reporting that promotes *their* objectives and avoids trouble. The media wants stories to interest viewers or readers. School officials thus may perceive the media distorting or sensationalizing events, taking comments out of context, or reporting facts inaccurately. From its side, the media may see administrators refusing to "come clean" or limiting media access to information and offering them material that is little more than puffery—enthusiastic but not newsworthy.

Striking the right balance would be easier if schools were accessible to the media *and* accepted the need for the coverage of news—good and bad—advise Bagin and colleagues. Schools need to recognize the media's legitimate function as eyes, ears, and voice of its community, they say. School officials should treat reporters not as intruders, but as trained professionals with a right to keep their public informed. But because the media's function is to report what it knows, school officials would be well advised to avoid saying things

they don't want published.

A working relationship based on trust and mutual respect and understanding can be promoted by the school's willingness to give the press a diet of news *steadily*—not just at budget time. Honesty, credibility, and respect for reporters' needs with regard to deadlines also contribute to a good working relationship.

It's also helpful for school officials to get to know reporters personally. Reporters are paid to cover the news, however; friendships will never prevent the reporting of unfavorable events. Although most reporters are conscientious and careful, many are so overworked and burdened by deadline pressure that some honest mistakes are inevitable. School leaders should make it a practice never to take negative coverage or mistakes personally.

In working with the media, say Bagin and colleagues, schools should:

- know a paper's policies and deadlines, and respect them in preparing or releasing material
- provide the media with calendars of newsworthy events, and agendas of meetings
- call press conferences when damaging events occur
- alert the press to potential stories
- deal with the press honestly, sincerely, and fairly
- send the press formal invitations to school functions
- cultivate relations with broadcast, as well as print, media

## The Local Newspaper

Of all media outlets, says Armistead, probably the quickest, cheapest way to reach large numbers of people is through the community newspaper. Many citizens—even those without children in schools—get their information about schools this way.

If you have access to such resources, Armistead advises using the school district's public relations and media professionals: they have the skills, experience, contacts, and time to obtain the needed coverage. If you don't have access to a public relations staff, he says, write your own news releases and send them from the school. It's a good idea, he says, to contact the managing editor directly with your suggestions for news coverage, first checking the newspaper's schedule so you don't undo all the good effects by calling at the worst possible time: just before final deadline on a busy, understaffed day.

Editors like material that is timely and new, and being part of a school gives you an almost unlimited source of possibilities. A good rule of thumb, says Armistead, is that any event involving a large number of people has news potential.

Nicholas Criscuolo also stresses the value of regular, personal contact between educators and reporters for paving the way to increasing both the amount and quality of news coverage. He suggests meeting with them to discuss coverage—past, present, and future—and scheduling your own news conferences often enough not to "disappear" from the public mind. Most

newspapers—and many television stations—have reporters assigned to the "education beat," and Criscuolo suggests making a special effort to invite these people to school so they may observe various events and activities. Even if they were already planning to attend, it creates a nice, friendly, open impression.

Criscuolo also recommends making use of your staff's writing talents, with regard to contributed articles for newspaper publication. If all else fails, he says, don't be afraid to do it yourself. If you can make such a commitment, volunteer to write a regular newspaper column or editorial page feature about various school-related topics, especially if the newspaper doesn't have a regular education reporter.

## Radio and Television

Although newspapers may come to mind first when educators think of publicity or news coverage, radio and television can also play major roles in any school's publicity program.

Most stations have standardized procedures for use of "PSAs"—or public service announcements—developed from information supplied to them by various organizations and institutions, including schools. You should not expect these opportunities to be volunteered, however, warns Armistead. Your best course, again, is regular, personal contact with the news director or program director. Simply pick up the phone and ask.

In addition, he says, educators should become familiar with regularly broadcast news features—those hour or thirty-minute programs that feature local news. The station's program director can give you necessary information about details, restrictions (if any), and deadlines.

Television will be more selective than newspapers or even radio, says Armistead, but an administrator who remembers to "think visually" will seldom have much trouble. Always keep in mind this medium's need to have something they can *show* their audience.

## Your Own Resources—Inhouse Media

School-based media are another way of reaching various groups. These media allow school leaders to say exactly what they want in a form that is under their control. Those who develop a publication of this type should keep its primary purpose in mind, understand its intended audience, and make certain the benefits justify the costs. All written material—from letters to brochures—should strive for clarity in writing, format, design, and graphics.

Printed material should be distributed by mail. Sending it home by students may be cheaper, but the U.S. Postal Service is considerably more reliable!

A 1980 Michigan survey of parents showed that roughly 80 percent of them got their school news from the humble newsletter. Others reported that notes, comments on school papers, memos, and other similar material generated by the school were regular sources of the same kind of information. Additional surveys cited by Armistead also show that newsletters are important sources

of information for parents. The underlying message, he says, is that you should never underestimate the value or importance of your school's newsletter. They are much more widely read than you may have thought.

In preparing a newsletter, says Armistead, it's important to avoid the appearance that you only publish when you want something from its readers. The sudden arrival of a newsletter or some other school publication, bristling with budget figures and your interpretation of them, plus your arguments for approval of the overall budget—all coincidentally a week before the big budget election—will work against you. It is very likely to generate more suspicion than support and cost you valuable credibility.

Instead, says Armistead:

- Write frequently.
- Write in language that your readers will understand.
- Write about things that will interest them.

Lack of funds needn't keep you from having a newsletter. Local businesses may be willing to support part or all of such publications in exchange for mention or credit as sponsors.

As a matter of cautionary common sense, have someone *else* read everything before you mail it to the community. Those tales in *Readers Digest* about embarrassing typos are amusing but all-too-familiar. In addition to creating a kind of perverse immortality for you, they also work against a campaign that should be showcasing your professionalism and expertise as it builds community confidence.

Staff bulletins may be your best method of keeping everyone current on inhouse information. These bulletins don't *need* to be fancy, literary, or particularly artistic, says Armistead, but they need to serve their primary function, come out regularly, and go to everyone.

Again, they should have information the staff needs and wants to know in language that will make it clear to them.

In some schools, staff bulletins are also sent to people outside the school—the president of the local parent-teacher organization, chairs of advisory groups, booster clubs, and sometimes even the media. If your staff bulletin can be used this way as well, you have an excellent method of informing additional groups about your school without additional cost in time and money.

Lee Schmitt adds that publications such as letters, annual reports, budget proposals, and other documents can sometimes serve the same purpose, if their content is suitable for publicity. In addition, he points out, announcement boards, public exhibits, showcases, wall displays, and the like can also "get the school's message across" in a simple, relatively painless way. Conferences and other programs, while not technically broadcasting, can often reach audiences—those actually attending—in much the same manner, with just as effective an impact. In some cases, the impact, because of its simplicity and low-keyed quality, can be even more effective than a more elaborate, hard-sell approach.

An audience motivated to attend school programs may not always

come predisposed to support you or the school, but they can often be won over by an effective, well-documented, well-presented program. At least, you can count on such audiences to listen attentively.

## Surveys

One way to find out what the public thinks or wants from schools is the opinion survey. When most of us hear the word *survey*, we tend to think of the national polls: Harris, Gallup, and Nielsen and Arbitron rating services. Technically, however, a poll can also be a show of hands from that same attentive audience in your auditorium.

One innovative Oregon principal makes it a point to provide a generous supply of number 2 pencils at all breakfast meetings. She invites those attending to write down any ideas or comments relating to the agenda and business at hand, then to turn them in, coffee stains and all. Many schools include a "log" for parental comments on their report cards. Others regularly place questionnaires in their own newsletters, school paper, or the community newspaper.

In larger school districts, a public relations office commonly handles polling and survey research, whereas smaller school districts rely on their individual school staffs for such expertise. These days, not many graduates of accredited schools of education will have missed at least brushing up against a course or two on statistics. Even with limited actual experience, most of these people will be able to handle a survey of limited, carefully defined scope.

Before beginning such a formal survey, however, an administrator should decide what information is needed (and why) and have some idea of the cost involved. If the cost is a problem, it may be possible to get the same information by other means—by informally polling key communicators, for example.

Once a survey strategy has been chosen, the next step is to define whom to survey, what type of survey to use, and what questions to ask. It's important to realize, in advance, how reliable the survey will be and how quickly the results will be available. The best, most reliable, and economical survey will be an ongoing program that keeps schools and public constantly informed about each other.

However, you may find yourself heading a small, special staff of researchers, or even doing the job yourself, depending on the information you require, time constraints, staffing, and resources. Using a study of legislative behavior as a model, Lee Anderson and his colleagues discuss the steps involved in the research process:

- design of project
- hypothesis making
- data collection
- generation of measures and indexes
- inference from empirical findings

A handbook by Charles Backstrom and Gerald Hursh-Cesar provides a collection of checklists that are of use for the actual conducting of surveys, whether you are a beginning pollster or an advanced scholar with extensive experience in various kinds of research. It is designed to be used as a guide for field studies that are also training sessions for those less familiar with survey research.

In sum, the key to good public relations is knowing whom you want to reach, knowing what they know, and knowing how to tell them what they *don't* know.

## A Time-Saving Suggestion

An effective public relations program is essential to a school, but it takes time, one commodity no principal has enough of. One solution to this problem is to assess the situation, decide on a suitable public relations approach, and devote five minutes a day to implementing it. If the first day's task takes more than five minutes, the time can be credited to future days. As a result, there will be a systematic and ongoing effort to improve public relations that does not make unreasonable demands on the principal's time. Several writers suggest that it is surprising how much can be accomplished with even this modest investment of time.

# Conclusion

Communicating can be a complex, difficult (as well as occasionally frustrating) business. Yet for the school leader who perseveres in understanding and communicating with students, parents, staff members, other administrators, and the community, there is a rich payoff. Effective communication with these groups can produce a positive school climate and good school-community relations.

Although there's no secret formula for communicating effectively, a few general guidelines have emerged from our discussion. The dominant theme is the need for clarity, which is at the heart of good communication, whether spoken or written. Parents, media representatives, and other citizens need to be kept informed, in the clearest possible terms, about what is happening in the schools.

Equally important, communication is a two-way process that involves listening as well as talking. There may be times when the best way to communicate—or to lead—is simply to listen to what others have to say.